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ABSTRACT

A study investigating the perceptions of students of English as a second language (ESL) regarding formal and informal speech in English also looked at their implications for teaching ESL. It was proposed that because the manner of speech a teacher uses may influence the students' ability to acquire the material presented, it may be helpful to understand learners' perceptions of one aspect of teacher language, the degrees of formality. In the experiment, 30 intermediate level ESL college students listened to 12 recorded speech samples of one speaker using four degrees of formality/informality as defined by phonological variations in contractions and reduced forms of words. The students then completed a separate test protocol regarding their perceptions of each statement. Resulting mean scores indicated that ESL students perceived the speaker using formal speech as more educated, polite, easy to understand, interesting, and helpful than the speaker using informal speech. Results from a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant difference in ESL students' perceptions of the speaker as being educated and polite when formal speech was used. The results suggest there may be advantages in teachers' using more formal speech in the classroom. (Author/MSE)

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ESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL SPEECH

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Sally Meiske

ESL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL SPEECH

This study investigates ESL students' perceptions of formal and informal speech and the implications for TESOL. Because the manner of speech a teacher uses may influence the students' ability to acquire the material presented, it may be helpful to realize what perceptions ESL learners have of one aspect of teacher speech: varying degrees of formality. The variables measured in this study are ESL learners' perceptions of a speaker using four levels of informal/formal speech as defined by phonological variations in contractions and reduced forms of words. In the experiment, thiry intermediate level grammar students at the Monterey Penninsula College listened to twelve recorded speech samples made by one speaker using varying degrees of formality. They then completed a separate test protocol regarding their perceptions of each statement. Resulting mean scores indicate that ESL students perceive the speaker using formal speech as being more educated, polite, easy to understand, interesting and helpful than when informal speech was used. Results from a one-way ANOVA indicate a significant difference in ESL students' perceptions of the speaker as being educated and polite when a formal level of speech was used. The results of this study indicate there may be advantages to using more formal speech when teaching in an ESL classroom.

In order for students to acquire language, they must be provided with comprehensible input . ESL students' comprehension of English may be affected by the way a teacher speaks. Specifically, it could influence the students' affective filter if they are either "put off" or encouraged by the teacher's style of speech . In this way, the speech a teacher uses may promote or inhibit the students' intake or input.*

Faced with nonnative speakers, teachers usually make more of an effort to simplify their speech (Chaudron,1983). Grammatical modifications in teacher-speech are noticeable to outsiders. Teacher talk is immediately recognisable (Heath,1980:1) This is because it is geared towards a specific audience: ESL students. In this way, teacher talk is a special register of language (Chaudron, 1983). Hudson defines registers as "varieties according to use" (Hudson,1980:48). Situation and setting may determine different registers. Speech varies according to situation and setting (Brown, 1979). The setting and situation in an ESL classroom define the register used in teacher talk.

* Several ideas of Krashan are related to this issue and discussed in: The Monitor Model for Second Language Acquisition,1978. The concepts of comprehensible input, affective filter and acquisition are defined in his paper.

A register may also vary according to the degree of formality used in speech. When referring to the difference between articulated speech and relaxed speech for informal gatherings, Weinstein notes "'classroom' English and English of the real world may sound different" (Weinstein, 1982). Teachers may use a more formal speech than is used in the outside world (Heath,1980). Characteristics of formal speech include speaking rythmically and with phonological precision, using polite forms of address, using a proliferation of nouns, and elaborating on syntax and lexicon (Brown,1979). On the other hand, characteristics of informal speech include speaking at a faster pace, ennunciating words less clearly and using reduced forms and contractions in speech (Ibid).

It is possible that ESL students may be more receptive to one style of speech over another. For example, if they are more receptive to formal speech, perhaps this register of speech promotes second language learning in the classroom.

The purpose of this research is to examine ESL students' perceptions of formal and informal speech. The null hypothesis is stated: There will be no statistically significant difference in ESL students' perceptions of formal and informal speech as defined by phonological variations of contractions and reduced forms of words.

METHOD

Subjects Thirty ESL students registered in the Spring Semester intermediate level Grammar class ESL 200 at Monterey Penninsula College participated in this study. These subjects represented eight different language backgrounds: three Turkish, one Saudi Arabian, one Italian, thirteen Vietnamese, one Chinese, one Indonesian, eight Korean and two Japanese.

Materials and Procedures Each subject was given a questionnaire on which they were asked to give information concerning sex, age, native

language and years spent in the United States (see Appendix A). Instructions on filling out the questionnaire were provided in writing. Next, students read instructions on listening to twelve recorded statements and filling out separate test protocols for each speech sample.

The subjects heard taped speeches varying with respect to formal and informal English as defined by the use of contractions and reduced forms of words. The ESL students recorded their perceptions of each sentence heard on a separate test protocol. There were three propcsitions used for this procedure. Each devised proposition had four variations of sentences. These sentences varied according to four levels of formal and informal English defined by phonological variations in two constructs: contractions and reduced forms of words. The four sentences in each propositions contained one of the following combinations:

1. absence of contraction and absense of reduced form.
2. absence of contraction and presence of reduced form.
3. presence of contraction and absence of reduced form.
4. presence of contraction and presence of reduced form.

In operationally defining formal speech as having phonological precision, option #1 (above) was read aloud as an example of formal speech in this experiment. The presence of both a contraction and reduced form in option #4 (above) was an example of informal speech, which is defined for the purpose of this experiment as containing both contractions and reduced forms.*

Twelve sentences were used in the recordings for the experiment. They are as follows:

Proposition I.
1. You will have to finish your homework.
2. You will hafta finish your homework.
3. You'll have to finish your homework.
4. You'll hafta finish your homework.

* Items 2 and 3 above constitute combinations of formal and informal speech since they have both aspects of formal and informal speech as defined by contractions and reduced forms.

Proposition II.
1. I will want to have you read this aloud.
2. I will wanna have you read this aloud.
3. I'll want to have you read this aloud.
4. I'll wanna have you read this aloud.

Proposition III.
1. I am going to hand back your papers now.
2. I am gonna hand back your papers now.
3. I'm going to hand back your papers now.
4. I'm gonna hand back your papers now.

Each of these sentences was read by one American woman into a tape recorder. The sentences were randomized to prevent all formal, semi-formal and informal sentences from being heard in a regular sequence (see Appendix B). Each sentence was mediated by another female speaker (i.e.- the mediator would introduce each of the speech samples as 'Speaker #____' before the speech sample was heard). In between each speech sample, the subjects were given as much time as they needed to record their perceptions of the speaker in each instance. These perceptions were recorded on a subjective reaction test protocol patterned after the semantic differential scale.

Ten pairs of adjectival antonyms were constructed and placed at two ends of a 4 point bipolar scale. A 4 point scale was used to prevent the subjects from consistently marking each of their perceptions on the mid-point of a 5 point bipolar scale (see Appendix C). The test protocol consisting of this scale was reproduced for each variation of the propositions. The students recorded their perceptions of each speech on a separate test protocol. They were not allowed to look at the protocol after they had finished it in order to elicit spontaneous responses and to prevent them from changing their marks on the protocol.

Variables The independent variable in this study is level of formal and informal English as defined by phonological variations in two constructs: contractions and reduced forms of words. The dependent variable in this study is the ESL students' perceptions of formal and informal English as

measured on a test protocol.

Data Analysis The procedure of quantification involved numbering each point the subjects marked on the test protocols from 1 to 4 starting with the utmost left adjective. The quantities were tallied according to the level of formal/informal speech used in the speech samples for each of the five adjectival antonyms. For example, on the adjectival antonym scale for formal speech samples, "not helpful _ _ _ x helpful", subject #1 recorded his perceptions of the speaker in each of the three speech samples in which no contractions or reduced forms of words were used. Because he marked an "x" next to to utmost right adjective for each sentence, the total amount of points used in this subject's perception of formal speech was 4+4+4=12. In other words, he felt the speaker using formal speech was very helpful. In the same way, points were totaled for the subject's perceptions of the speaker using various levels of informal speech. This same procedure was adapted for each subject's perceptions of the speech samples.

Means were computed for each of the four groups of three sentences representing varying levels of formality. This was done for each of the five adjectival antonyms.

In addition, an ANOVA was conducted using the Ed-Sci Developmental Statistical package for the Apple computer. The thirty subjects' perceptions of the speaker using varying levels of formal speech were computed using a one-way ANOVA test with four levels of the independent variable.

RESULTS

The mean scores of ESL students' perceptions of the four levels of informal/formal speech for each of the adjectival antonym scales show a consistent increase in favorable perceptions when the speech samples heard were formal. Stated differently, ESL students consistently perceived the

speaker as being more educated, easy to understand, polite, interesting, and helpful when formal speech was used. (The mean scores for the two semi-formal variations fluctuate inconsistently around the formal and informal mean scores.)

The results of the ANOVA show significant differences in ESL students' perceptions of the speaker as being educated (at $p < .05$) and polite (at $p < .01$) according to levels of formal/informal speech. Stated differently, formal speech samples elicited reactions that the speaker was more educated and polite when formal speech was used.

The null hypothesis can be rejected. There is a statistically significant difference in ESL students' perceptions of formal/informal speech.

Limitations of the Research

Although several moderator variables were first considered, no moderator variables were used in this study. Due to the small sample size, it was felt thatthe levels of moderator variables could not be accurately measured. Because the subjects were all students from the same ESL intermediate grammar class, the scope of generalizability of this study could also be limited.

Conclusion and Implications for TESOL

"Attitude is important, and contributes to a lower affective filter, thus promoting second language proficiency"(Krashen 1978:24). Krashen deduces that if our major goal in language teaching is to develop communicative abilities of our students, attitudinal and motivational factors are more important than aptitude (ibid).

If students form a positive attitude about their ESL instructor, their ability to communicate in the second language is increased. Students may

form attitudes about their teacher based on the way he/she speaks. If students have positive attitudes about their instructor, their second language proficiency may increase as their affective filter is lowered. "It is useful to realize people make judgements based solely on speech samples" (Ohashi, 1982). ESL students are certainly not exempt from this statement!

The results of the means analysis in this study suggest ESL students perceive a speaker using informal speech as being more educated, polite, easy to understand, helpful and interesting. Moreover, statistically significant differences found when conducting an ANOVA show that a speaker using formal speech elicits perceptions that he/she is more educated and polite. Because the results of this study imply that ESL students have more favorable attitudes towards speakers using formal speech, it is suggested that there may be advantages to using more formal speech in the classroom. Because ESL students may be more receptive to formal speech (as opposed to informal speech) used in the classroom, their ability to acquire the second language may improve.

APPENDIX A

means, standard deviations ? (Subjects' responses are marked in red.)

Questionnaire

Place an "X" by the questions when appropriate or fill in the blank by the question.

Age: $\bar{X} = 25.77$ $s = 7.81$ Sex: Male 13 Female 17

1. What is your native language? Turkey - 3, Saudi Arabia - 1, Italy - 1, Vietnam - 13, China - 1, Indonesia - 1, Korea - 8, Japan - 2

2. Is this your first time in the U.S.? Yes 22 No 8

3. How long have you currently been living in the U.S.? $\bar{X} = 41.97$ mo., $s = 6.1$

4. How long have you studied English? $\bar{X} = 35.17$ mo. $s = 4.73$

5. Which ESL class(es) are you currently registered in? (Please include course number). ESL 250

* * * \

APPENDIX B

This is the order of the sentences as they were read into the tape-recorder.

The 12 Sentences Used

in the Speech Samples

Degree of Formality	Contraction	Reduced Form	
reduced form only		x	1. You will hafta finish your homework.
FORMAL			2. I will want to have you read this aloud.
INFORMAL	x	x	3. I'm gonna hand back your papers now.
reduced form only		x	4. I will wanna have you read this aloud.
INFORMAL	x	x	5. You'll hafta finish your homework.
reduced form only		x	6. I am gonna hand back your papers now.
FORMAL			7. You will have to finish your homework.
contraction only	x		8. I'm going to hand back your papers now.
INFORMAL	x	x	9. I'll wanna have you read this aloud.
contraction only	x		10. You'll have to finish your homework.
contraction only	x		11. I'll want to have you read this aloud.
FORMAL			12. I am going to hand back your papers now.

APPENDIX C

EXAMPLE OF THE TEST PROTOCOL

Sentence # _____

I feel the speaker of this sentence is:

UNEDUCATED	_____	_____	_____	_____	EDUCATED
IMPOLITE	_____	_____	_____	_____	POLITE
EASY TO UNDERSTAND	_____	_____	_____	_____	HARD TO UNDERSTAND
BORING	_____	_____	_____	_____	INTERESTING
HELPFUL	_____	_____	_____	_____	NOT HELPFUL

This is the test protocol used in the study. Certain pairs of adjectival antonyms were reversed in order to prevent patterned responses. For the purpose of tallying marks for the data analysis, all negative adjectival antonyms were placed on the utmost left-hand side of the scale. The marks were also adjusted accordingly.

TABLE 1

MEAN SCORES

Adjectival Antonym Scale	4 Levels of informal/formal speech: Informal	Reduced Form only	Contraction only	Formal
uneducated - educated	8.07	8.67	8.97	9.43
hard to understand - easy to understand	9.43	9.3	10.43	10.07
impolite - polite	6.97	7.6	8.67	8.83
boring - interesting	7.33	8.06	8.30	8.26
not helpful - helpful	7.93	9.13	8.46	8.93
combination of all scales $\bar{x}$=	7.95	8.55	8.97	9.10

This table represents the means computed when the subjects' marks on the test protocols for each speech sample were numbered from 1 to 4 starting with the utmost left adjective on each scale.

There were three speech samples in each of the four levels of speech. The marks for each of these samples according to the level of speech were averaged for each scale. 12 points were possible on a scale from 1 - 12.

Tables 2.0-2.5: One Way Analysis of Variance for each of the five Scales used
(*** indicates a significant difference between groups for ESL students' perceptions of formal/informal speech--the dependent variable, and the varying levels of formal/informal speech--the independent variable)

Table 2.0: Uneducated - Educated

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	29.50	3	9.83	2.72***
Within Groups	418.87	116	3.61	
Total	448.37	119		

F_{crit} = 2.68 at $p < .05$

Table 2.1: Hard to Understand-Easy to Understand

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	25.70	3	8.56	1.89
Within Groups	522.90	116	4.51	
Total	548.60	119		

F_{crit} 2.68 at $p < .05$ (no significance)

Table 2.3: Impolite-Polite

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	60.60	3	20.20	4.33***
Within Groups	541.27	116	4.67	
Total	601.87	119		

F_{crit} = 3.94 at $p < .01$

Table 2.4: Not Helpful-Helpful

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	25.70	3	8.57	1.81
Within Groups	548.67	116	4.73	
Total	574.37	119		

F_{crit} = 2.68 at $p < .05$ (no significance)

Table 2.5: Boring-Interesting

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	18.29	3	6.09	1.17
Within Groups	606.70	116	5.23	
Total	624.99	119		

F_{crit} = 2.68 at $p < .05$ (no significance) 12

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